

PRINT PLAY

New Prints 2003/Spring at IPCNY brings together 41 prints by 26 artists, some well known and others less so. As is usual with these juried shows, the concerns of artists are as varied as they are, and as printmakers they are working in a wealth of techniques, both traditional and experimental. To create her monumental woodcut landscape *Protuberance*, which is more than 67 inches square, the Israeli artist Orit Hofshi worked in the tried-and-true technique of rubbing the backs of her carved wood boards with a spoon; while the technologically sophisticated studio Laumont Editions digitally printed (with pigmented inks) several works in the show, including the three-part family portrait by Isca Greenfield-Saunders, which is based on a found photograph, and the stupendous abstraction *Bix I* by Andra Samelson, with its graphic of spun white lines on a blue ground. Once again, printmaking can be seen as a rich and multifarious endeavor in which veteran artists extend their tools and newcomers make surprising discoveries.

Perhaps the methods demanded by printmaking are apt to suggest play, for a number of works in this show evoke games or even embody them in their fabrication. Bill Thompson, for example, actually rolled a ball bearing dipped in sugar lift on a prepared plate, taking care that it not touch the edges of a wooden frame that surrounded the plate: the result is the inky tangle in his print *Locus*, done with James Stroud at Center Street Workshop in Milton, Mass. Malcolm Morley has long tapped the archetypal imagery of a child's view of emblematic objects and scenes; his large, colorful *P-26 Shooter*, printed in litho and silkscreen at Gemini G.E.L., is a model warplane whose parts are spread across the sheet from which they are theoretically (but not actually) to be cut. Jessica Frelinghuysen's colorful two-sided screenprint helmets, laid out as if for assembly, are difficult to visualize as anything with a remotely practical end; laid out on the sheet, complete with directions, they seem more metaphysical than real (though they can, indeed, be cut out and assembled as absurdist headgear). "Ideal for people who see things from only one viewpoint," or "Good for short naps during the day, or use to avoid eye contact," read the legends to her *Peripheral Vision Helmet*, adding something of an existential dimension to the existing two.

Not so hypothetical is Sara Varon's screenprint *Laundry Truck*, which is also meant to be cut out and assembled, with both inside and outside vividly depicted (in the exhibition the inside is left flat on the sheet and the truck assembled, its exterior visible, complete with raucous inhabitants, to construct Varon's "semi-autobiographical narrative of urban life"). Varon is clearly indebted to the veteran model-builder Red Grooms, conveniently represented here with his own three-dimensional slice of urban life, *Extra! Extra! Read All About It!*, a recent take on that staple of New York life, the sidewalk newsstand. Toylike—and urban—as well is Brant Schuller's *Nested Towers*, a skyscraper made of cardboard boxes that have been screenprinted with windows in a rather abstract grid. For Sarah Hauser, however, toys become the psychologically complex inhabitants of the imaginary world of her drawings and etchings. Reminiscent of work by Liliana Porter, Hauser's prints show toys "going on adventures," as she puts it. In *Discussing the Future* they take on a rather moody ambiguity as she uses "warm blacks and sepia tones in order to give the print a dated quality as well as to further enhance the dreamlike atmosphere of the images," as she has written. More threatening is Will Cotton's allegory of, as he says, "temptation and excess," in the form of a candy house that

bulges and swells as if bewitched—a pretty little etching printed by Greg Burnet that is the stuff of childhood nightmares.

In several prints the game is more one of perception. Such is always the case with Anonymouse and his famous alter-ego Bruce Conner, well known for their ink-blot drawings and prints. Here is a particularly beautiful example, with the rows of blots printed in litho in pale green and gray on chine collé by Ed Hamilton to create an incredible delicacy and translucency, with the blots taking on, as usual, a kind of surreal faciality. Myron Turner takes as his point of departure Eadweard Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* for his black-and-white woodcut *Cat Galloping*, in which it is difficult to make out the black cat, which has been digitized into large pixels that set up an optical buzz of black and white, foreground and background: a kind of dynamic homage to his source. Turner writes that he creates "computer-generated abstractions—zooms, fractals— [that] suggest a universe of algorithmic forces in which the individual disappears." The night skies of Vija Celmins, too, waver between representation and abstraction, as in *Night Sky I (Reversed)*, a photogravure with aquatint, etching, and drypoint. And although Kelly Driscoll calls her etchings *Continuance—Clouds*, the marks she has made in these white-on-white works are merely hatchmarked, curving zones of drypoint rapidly executed on a steady ground of line etching. These marks merely resemble clouds. Celmins and Driscoll find nature nearly by accident, returning it to art by design.

Not all is play in this latest crop of new prints. The hunched hare in Sophie Ryder's collagraph *Bending Figure II*, printed at Goya-Girl Press in Baltimore, dense with scaly hatchmarks, is hardly the Easter Bunny: the grief or pain that wracks it seems more the stuff of adult suffering than that of childhood. Cecily's Brown's *Squint*, a litho printed at Universal Limited Art Editions, is full-blooded eroticism, with its nude embedded in a vaguely sexual narrative unfolding in a red room. And Kiki Smith's extraordinary portrait of a man's head, doubled, with eyes closed and slightly open (the etching *Two*, printed at Harlan & Weaver), could be as much a representation of dying as of sleep. Curiously absent from the submissions were very many prints with political content; a splendid exception is Enrique Chagoya's large *La portentosa Vida de la Muerte*, in which an old woman engages a skeleton, printed in litho on chine collé by Bud Shark at Shark's Ink. "Greed breeds power," reads a tiny legend that runs in a continuous line around the figures, "Power breeds corruption/ Corruption breeds inequality/ Inequality breeds war/ War breeds misery," etc. Something of a gap exists between the time these prints were made and recent world events. Chagoya serves to remind us of the important role prints have played traditionally in sending out messages of outrage and protest.

Too, the print mediums have here inspired an intricacy of form that transcends what might be seen as rather cryptic content—as is the case, for example, in Phillip Chen's relief etching *Prairie Breaker*, with its elaborate white linear web of forms with digital overtones, laid over the image of an old-fashioned pickaxe: perhaps a parable of frontiers both mental and physical. Most exquisite, perhaps, is Vija Celmins' *Untitled (Web 4)*, a photogravure with aquatint and drypoint. Here the web really is a web—or, rather, the image of a web, that of a spider, spun in white over a pale gray ground. Play can be serious business, a matter of survival, though it also may result in the sort of beauty that is the outcome of skill and accident, a combination that is printmaking's special domain.

—Faye Hirsch

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